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"THE NOODLE FACTORY"
from ***Palm Sunday***
by Kurt Vonnegut

On October 1, 1976,1 would pay this circuitous tribute to the art of reading at the dedication of a new library at Connecticut College, New London:

"The name of this speech is 'The Noodle Factory.'

"Like life itself, this speech will be over before you know it. Life is so short!

“I was born only yesterday morning, moments after day-break—and yet, this afternoon, I am fifty-four years old. I am a mere baby, and yet here I am dedicating a library. Something has gone wrong.

"I have a painter friend named Syd Solomon. He was also born only yesterday. And the next thing he knew, it was time for him to have a retrospective exhibition of his paintings going back thirty-five years. Syd asked a woman claiming to be his wife what on earth had happened. She said, 'Syd, you're fifty-eight years old now.' "You can imagine how he felt.

"Another thing Syd found out was that he was a veteran of something called the Second World War. Somebody said I was in that war, too. Maybe so. I don't argue when people tell me things like that.

"I decided to read up on that war some. I went to a library a lot like this one. It was a building full of books. I learned that the Second World War was so terrible that it caused Adolf Hitler himself to commit suicide. Think of that: He had just been born, and suddenly it was time for him to shoot himself.

"That's history for you. You can read about it yourself.

"My friend Syd Solomon was certainly luckier than Hitler. All Syd had to do was put on a retrospective exhibition. So I tried to help him out—by writing an essay for the front of his catalogue.

"That is certainly one of the nice things about this planet, I think—the way people will try to help other people sometimes.

"In the words of Barbra Streisand, which should perhaps be emblazoned on the facade of this building, along with a picture of an atomic submarine: 'People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.'

"In order to write the essay about Syd's paintings, I had to ask him what he thought he was doing with paint. He was an abstract expressionist, you see. His paintings looked like bright weather to me—neon thunderstorms and the like.

"Was I ever in for a shock! Syd could not tell me what he thought he was doing!

"This did not wobble my opinions of Syd or his work. Syd and his paintings remained as honorable and beautiful as ever. What I lost faith in was the English language—by far the largest language in the world, incidentally. We have more words than anybody.

"But our great language, when confronted by abstract expressionism, was failing Syd and me—and every art critic I ever read.

"The language was speechless!

"Until that moment of truth, I had agreed with the Nobel-prize chemist, the late Irving Langmuir, who once said within my hearing, 'Any person who can't explain his work to a fourteen-year-old is a charlatan.'

"I couldn't believe that anymore.

"So what I finally wrote for Syd's catalogue was your standard load of horse crap about modern art.

"It may be in your library here. Enjoy it in good health.

"But the puzzle has been on my mind ever since—and I have good news for you today. I can once again agree with Dr. Langmuir about charlatans. Here, in simple English, is what Syd Solomon does:

"He meditates. He connects his hand and paintbrush to the deeper, quieter, more mysterious parts of his mind—and he paints pictures of what he sees and feels down there.

This accounts for the pleasurable shock of recognition we experience when we look at what he does.

"How nice!

"Hooray for Syd Solomon! I say. He is certainly more enterprising and useful than all the quack holy men who meditate deeply, who then announce smugly that it is impossible for them to express what they have seen and felt.

"The heck with inarticulate meditators! And three cheers for all artists who dare to show and tell.

"Since we are here to dedicate a library, let us especially applaud those artists we call writers. By golly, aren't writers wonderful? They don't just keep their meditations to themselves. They very commonly give themselves migraine headaches and ulcers, and destroy their livers and their marriages, too, doing their best to show and tell.

"I once learned how to be the other sort of meditator, the sort that doesn't show and tell. I paid Maharishi Mahesh Yogi eighty dollars to show me how.

"Maharishi Mahesh Yogi gave me a mantra, a nonsense word I was supposed to say over and over to myself as I sank deeper and deeper into my mind. I promised not to tell anybody what my mantra was. This was it: Aye-eem.

"I will now demonstrate. [Going into a trance] Aye-eem, aye-eem, aye-eem…

[Emerging from the trance] "Where am I? Am I still fifty-four? Or am I

eighty-six now? I wouldn't be surprised. "All right—that was the socially fruitless sort of meditation. I feel mildly refreshed, but I don't see how that can be much use to anybody else in New London or anywhere.

"Now for the socially fruitful sort of meditation, which has filled this noble building here: When writers meditate, they don't pick bland, meaningless mantras to say over and over to themselves. They pick mantras that are hot and prickly, full of the sizzle and jingle-jangle of life. They jazz the heck out of their inner beings with the mantras they pick.

"I will give you some examples:

"War and Peace.
"The Origin of Species.
"The Iliad.
"Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.
"Critique of Pure Reason.
"Madame Bovary.
"Life on the Mississippi.
"Romeo and Juliet.
"The Red Badge of Courage.

"I only wish I had your card catalogue here. I could go on and on with literary mantras that have changed the world for the better.

"About The Red Badge of Courage, by the way: That story by Stephen Crane is supposed to be a particularly salutary story for Americans to read—especially during the bicentennial. But I know another story by Crane which, in my opinion, is even more instructive for Americans of our time. Perhaps you know it, too. It is called The Blue Hotel.'

' 'The Blue Hotel' is about a foreigner who comes here and commits murder. He imagines that he is defending himself. He has scared himself out of his wits, thinking that Americans are much more dangerous than they really are.

"So he kills. "So much for that.

"Ten percent of you may be wondering by now why I called this speech 'The Noodle Factory.' One hundred percent of me is delighted to explain:

"It is very simple. The title is an acknowledgment of the fact that most people can't read, or, in any event, don't enjoy it much.

"Reading is such a difficult thing to do that most of our time in school is spent learning how to do that alone. If we had spent as much time at ice skating as we have with reading, we would all be stars with the Hollywood Ice Capades instead of bookworms now.

"As you know, it isn't enough for a reader to pick up the little symbols from a page with his eyes, or, as is the case with a blind person, with his fingertips. Once we get those symbols inside our heads and in the proper order, then we must clothe them in gloom or joy or apathy, in love or hate, in anger or peacefulness, or however the author intended them to be clothed. In order to be

good readers, we must even recognize irony—which is when a writer says one thing and really means another, contradicting himself in what he believes to be a beguiling cause.

"We even have to get jokes! God help us if we miss a joke.

"So most people give up on reading.

"So—for all the jubilation this new library will generate in the community at large, this building might as well be a noodle factory. Noodles are okay. Libraries are okay. They are rather neutral good news.

"Perhaps the central concept of this beautifully organized speech will enter the patois of Connecticut College.

"One student may say to another, 'You want to go out and drink some beer?'

"The other might reply: 'No. I'm about to flunk out, they tell me. In view of the heartbreaking sacrifices my parents have made to send me here, I guess I'd better go spend some time at the Noodle Factory instead.'

"A student might ask a particularly dumb question of a professor, and the professor might tell him, 'Go to the Noodle Factory and find out.'

"And so on.

"This noble stone-and-steel bookmobile is no bland noodle factory to us, of course, to this band of readers—we few, we happy few. Because we love books so much, this has to be one of the most buxom, hilarious days of our lives.

"Are we foolish to be so elated by books in an age of movies and television? Not in the least, for our ability to read, when combined with libraries like this one, makes us the freest of women and men—and children.

"(That is such a strange word on a printed page, incidentally: 'freest—f-r-e-e-s-t.' I'm glad I'm not a foreigner.)

"Anyway—because we are readers, we don't have to wait for some communications executive to decide what we should think about next—and how we should think about it. We can fill our heads with anything from aardvarks to zucchinis—at any time of night or day.

"Even more magically, perhaps, we readers can communicate with each other across space and time so cheaply. Ink and paper are as cheap as sand or water, almost. No board of directors has to convene in order to decide whether we can afford to write down this or that. I myself once staged the end of the world on two pieces of paper—at a cost of less than a penny, including wear and tear on my typewriter ribbon and the seat of my pants.

"Think of that.

"Compare that with the budgets of Cecil B. DeMille.

"Film is simply one more prosthetic device for human beings who are incomplete in some way. We live not only in the Age of Film, but in the Age of False Teeth and Glass Eyes and Toupees and Silicone Breasts—and on and on.

"Film is a perfect prescription for people who will not or cannot read, and have no imagination. Since they have no imaginations, those people can now be shown actors and scenery instead—with appropriate music and all that.

"But, again, film is a hideously expensive way to tell anybody anything—and I include television and all that. What is more: Healthy people exposed to too many actors and too much scenery may wake up some morning to find their own imaginations dead.

"The only cure I know of is a library—and the ability to read.

"Reading exercises the imagination—tempts it to go from strength to strength.

"So much for that.

"It would surely be shapely on an occasion like this if something holy were said. Unfortunately, the speaker you have hired is a Unitarian. I know almost nothing about holy things.

"The language is holy to me, which again shows how little I know about holiness.

"Literature is holy to me, which again shows how little I know about holiness.

"Our freedom to say or write whatever we please in this country is holy to me. It is a rare privilege not only on this planet, but throughout the universe, I suspect. And it is not something somebody gave us. It is a thing we give to ourselves.

"Meditation is holy to me, for I believe that all the secrets of existence and nonexistence are somewhere in our heads— or in other people's heads.

"And I believe that reading and writing are the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has so far found.

"By reading the writings of the most interesting minds in history, we meditate with our own minds and theirs as well.

"This to me is a miracle.

"The motto of this noble library is the motto of all meditators throughout all time: 'Quiet, please.' "Thus ends my speech. "I thank you for your attention."